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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined college students' attitudes toward people with mental retardation as a function of experiences with this population. In the first study, college students (N=107), who were enrolled in a course, "Psychology of Mental Retardation," participated in a service learning experience by working in group homes, day treatment programs, integrated day care, or residential school settings. Students kept a journal and completed an anonymous questionnaire about their experiences. Content analysis showed positive attitudes about the experience and toward people with mental retardation. In the second study, attitudes of 48 students enrolled in the same course were compared with those of 25 students taking a consumer economics course. Students were administered the Community Living Attitudes Scale (CLAS-MR) prior to and following the course and service learning experience. On the pretest, there were no significant differences between the two groups on three of four dimensions ("exclusion," "sheltering," and "similarity"), but students taking the mental retardation course had more positive views toward "empowerment". Attitudes of students who completed the Psychology of Mental Retardation Class changed significantly over the course of the semester. They were more positive toward empowerment, less positive toward sheltering, more exclusive, and their attitudes didn't change toward similarity. Interpretations of these findings are provided. (Contains 23 references and questionnaire and CLAS-MR results.) (DB)

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College Students' Attitudes Towards Mental Retardation: A Pilot Study

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Abstract. College students enrolled in a course, Psychology of Mental Retardation (EPSY235), participated in a service learning experience by working in group home, day treatment and school-based programs with children and adults with mental retardation. Results of their experiences are reported in two areas: increased valuing assigned to people with mental retardation and decreased stereotyping of people with mr/dd. The Community Living Attitudes Scale (CLAS-MR) was administered to two groups of students, those taking the EPSY 235 course and those taking a Consumer Economics course. There were no significant differences between these groups on any of the scales of the CLAS-MR. Two versions, pre and post, of the CLAS-MR were given to students who participated in the service learning experiences. Change was noted for three of the four subscales: empowerment, exclusivity and sheltering ($p<.05$). Experiences with classmates with mental retardation interacted with amount of interaction with people with mental retardation to predict similarity scales. Paired samples tests for similarity did not indicate change, influenced by ceiling effects for pretest scales.

The concept of normalization has been the philosophical and ideological foundation for services to those with mental retardation and developmental disabilities since the 1960s (Nirje, 1969). In the 1970s, this concept was expanded to include an assignment of value to people with mental retardation called social valorization (Wolfensberger, 1972). Since 1978, PL 94-142 has changed the make-up of classrooms throughout the country as more children and youth with disabilities are being educated in the least restrictive environment and thus entering the public schools. Today the trend toward social valorization has developed to that of social empowerment, i.e. trusting that people with mental retardation can make choices about the ways they live their lives and honoring those choices. This shift requires a change in attitude toward those with mental retardation, a shift from caretaking to empowering. This requires becoming truly mindful about the needs and the abilities of those with mental retardation.

Attitudes toward those with mental retardation have varied over time, ranging from benevolence to ridicule (Clark & Clark, 1985). Clore & Jeffrey (1972) noted that positive attitude change will result when a non-handicapped person is exposed to a handicapped person in ways that can change a currently held stereotype. Changing a stereotype can be done by reducing discomfort, uneasiness or uncertainty felt by the non-handicapped person or by presenting enough information to contradict currently held stereotypes so that the present attitude is changed. Selected disabled persons, by their own personalities, can be powerful sources of information to contradict stereotypes.

Having a positive attitude toward those with mental retardation is a first step toward accepting them. Understanding people with developmental disabilities, and more particularly those with mental retardation, is particularly important for professionals in the human services disciplines. The Regular Education Initiative has advocated the inclusion of people with mental retardation in schools, workplace and residential settings. University programs preparing social service professionals are sadly lacking in courses and training experiences in the mental retardation discipline and their graduates resist working with this special population (DePoy & Miller, 1996).

A theoretical basis for understanding change in concept has been proposed by Langer (1989) in her theory of "mindfulness." People change their understandings of concepts based on their becoming mindful of them. Too often, Langer claimed, people exhibit "mindlessness" toward many concepts. Concept formation involves three stages: identifying information relevant to a problem, grouping information on the basis of some similarity, and developing categories and labels for the groups (Taba, 1966, in Joyce & Weil, 1986). The general public holds a position of mindlessness toward those with mental retardation (Langer, 1989). However, once someone has contact with a person who is different, one becomes mindful. Novelty typically provokes mindfulness (Langer & Chanowitz, 1988). Unfortunately simply becoming mindful does not mean that one alters one's concepts. People pay attention to those who are different. Differences lead to categorizations that initially are mindful; however, subsequent determinations such as stereotypes reflect premature cognitive commitments, or mindlessness. Categorizations may be positive or negative, however, with regard to mental retardation, categorizations have generally been uninformed and have led to negative attitudes, such as those

promoted by the eugenics movement (Beirne-Smith, Ittenbach & Patton, 1998). Contact alone has not resulted in attitudes conducive to social integration for those with mental retardation (Pittock & Potts, 1988). Only continued mindfulness toward people with mental retardation can eliminate stereotypical thinking and lead to a full appreciation of their complexity as human beings. Continued mindfulness, and thus a more positive and realistic attitude toward mental retardation is one expected outcome of integration in the public schools and the assignment of service-learning projects in conjunction with university classes.

Research on changing attitudes toward handicapped individuals has resulted in mixed reactions to a variety of conditions (Donaldson, 1980). Different conditions have been designed such as direct and indirect (via media) contact with persons with disabilities, information about disabilities, persuasive messages, analysis of dynamics of prejudice, disability simulation and group discussion. Structured experiences with or presentations of disabled persons consistently resulted in positive change. Unstructured social and/or professional contacts were inconsistent in their effects. Studies of the effect of course instruction provide little insight as to factors that contribute to an understanding of mental retardation because their effects are often confounded with direct/indirect contact, media exposure and instructor personality and attitudes (Donaldson, 1980). More recent reviews have indicated similar confusion. Rees, Spreen & Harnadek (1991) cited inconsistent results in a number of studies on effects of direct contact, effects of instruction and changing public awareness on attitudes toward mental retardation. Rees et al used a semantic differential technique to study attitudes toward mental retardation over the time period 1975-1988. These are the years immediately following the

implementation of PL94-142, the shift toward a philosophy of integration and greater awareness of the poor treatment given to people institutionalized for mental retardation. Findings included not only that attitudes had improved over time, but that direct experiences were beneficial in improving attitudes. However, the scales used in the study focus only on personality characteristics of those with mental retardation. These scales did not include measures of attitudes toward the policy changes that were introduced during this time period. Direct contact and educational experience do not always lead to improved attitudes. Students gained knowledge about mental retardation in a course on the topic, but their attitudes and beliefs about mental retardation and eugenics did not change(Kobe & Mulick, 1995).

The questions raised in this study are as follows: has normalization in terms of PL94-142 achieved its goal of acceptance for children and adults with mental retardation? Do direct experiences with the community of people with mental retardation change college students' ideas about them? The present study examined college students' reactions to people with mental retardation via attitude scale and open-ended questionnaires with respect to public school and university experiences working with the mental retardation community. Hypotheses were that a) previous public school experience with agemates with mental retardation would predict less stereotypical thinking about those with mental retardation; and b) students' attitudes toward mental retardation would become less stereotypical as a result of contact with members of that population.

Methods

Study 1

Subjects. Subjects were 58 traditional college-age students, 6 male and 52 female in the first year and 49 traditional college-age students, 7 male and 42 female in the second year, enrolled in a 3-credit course, Psychology of Mental Retardation. All Ss were assigned a service project as part of the course requirements. Ss worked in group homes, day treatment programs, integrated day care, and residential school settings for 20 hours over a ten-week period. Course content covered traditional topics, definitions of intelligence and retardation including levels of retardation, causes, best practices in education, family issues, sexuality, work and community issues. Ss were assigned media projects for which they viewed documentaries and popular films that included characters with mental retardation. Throughout the semester Ss kept journals documenting their experiences which were reviewed periodically. At the end of the semester, Ss were asked to complete anonymous questionnaires with open-ended questions. Questions included "What surprised you about your experience?" "What kinds, if any, of benefits do college students gain from service-learning experience?" "What were the most difficult and easiest parts of you experiences?" "What did you learn about yourself?" and "What did you learn about people with mental retardation?"

Results. The responses of Ss were collected and a content analysis was completed. Percentages were compiled for coded responses each year. (See Table 1 for second year percentages.) Students unanimously stated that the service project was a good idea. Twenty-three per cent rated the fact that they enjoyed the experience a "surprise."

Students had some difficulty determining whether or not people with mental retardation offered some value to society. While seventy-eight per cent of those who answered this question said that yes, these people have some value, only forty-seven percent of this group articulated any specific value. Thirteen percent said that this group does not offer any value to society. Eleven percent said the severity of retardation would influence their decision. A majority of students (76%) said that the easiest aspect of their service experience was actually interacting with the people with mental retardation.

With regard to overcoming stereotypical thinking, close to twenty-five per cent of the Ss noted that people with retardation were more unique than they had expected, in other words, that they were individuals, not simply representatives of a stereotyped group. Eighty-two per cent of the Ss commented specifically on the concept that people with mental retardation were similar to themselves. In addition, twenty-six percent of the students reported learning that people with mental retardation were more capable than they had believed prior to their first-hand experiences.

Discussion. Responses to questions were similar across the two years, with only a couple of exceptions. These differences are probably related to changes in the service format. The second semester, Ss worked with people with more severe handicaps. This accounts for comments about communication difficulties and the surprise of how limited were some of the people with whom Ss worked.

Study 2

Subjects. Subjects were 48 college students (43 females, 5 males) enrolled in Psychology of Mental Retardation and who completed as part of that course a service experience with people with mental retardation and 25 college students (24 female and 1

male) enrolled in a Consumer Economics class who did not complete a service experience. Course content for the Psychology of Mental Retardation was similar to what was described above with the addition of more structure to the reflections. Ss were directed to respond to particular questions each week as part of their journal entry and these were reviewed weekly. Ss attention was directed to physical space, limitations and adaptive skills, social interactions, sexuality, family and community relationships.

Data sources. Ss completed the Community Living Attitudes Scale (Henry, Keys, Jopp & Balcazar, 1996) at the beginning and end of the semester. This scale measures four dimensions: empowerment, exclusion, sheltering, and similarity on the basis of 6-point Likert scale. Empowerment indicates a view that persons with mental retardation should have a voice in decision-making that affects their lives. Exclusion indicates a view that persons with mental retardation should be segregated from community life and takes a negative tone. Sheltering indicates a view that persons with mental retardation should be segregated from the community for their own protection, thus taking a more positive tone than the Exclusion scale. Similarity measures the extent to which respondents perceive those with mental retardation to be basically like themselves in such areas as life goals and basic human rights. Demographic information collected included past elementary and secondary school experiences with people with mental retardation, *classmates status,* as well as a self-report of the amount of previous contact with people with mental retardation based on a 5-point Likert scale, *previous interaction*. Subjects who took the Psychology of Mental Retardation class completed an anonymous survey of open-ended questions.

Results. Comparisons across groups indicated no significant differences on pretest measures of similarity, sheltering, and exclusion on the CLAS. There was a significant difference in empowerment, $F(1,71) = 3.928$, $p < .05$, with students opting to take a course in Psychology of Mental Retardation taking a more positive view toward empowerment. There were no correlations across groups with respect to amount of previous interaction with people with mental retardation; however tests of between subjects effects for the Similarity scale demonstrated an interaction effect for amount of previous interaction and classmate status approaches significance $F(1, 65) = 3.723$, $p = .058$. Ss who had classmates with mental retardation and little or no interaction rated higher similarity scores than did those who had had classmates and high interaction scores. Ss who did not have classmates with mental retardation scored higher similarity scores when they had had more interactions than when they had fewer or no interactions.

Attitudes of students who completed the Psychology of Mental Retardation class changed significantly over the course of the semester. Student responses toward empowerment became more positive $t = -5.090$, $df = 41$, $p < .0001$. Students' attitudes toward sheltering became less positive $t = -3.295$, $df = 41$, $p = .002$. Students' attitudes became more exclusive, $t = -2.693$, $df = 41$, $p = .010$. Similarity attitudes showed no change, however they were quite high at the beginning of the semester and ceiling effects are the assumed reason for lack of change.

Discussion

Hypothesis A. Both studies support a positive trend toward basic rights for those with mental retardation. Both the unstructured responses and the scaled scores on the pretest CLAS Similarity subscale document a belief that people with mental retardation

have the same basic rights as everyone else. Scores on the CLAS approached ceiling limits for all groups. However, this belief did not disarm the fear that students reported on first interacting with members of the mental retardation community. Interaction effects of *having classmates with mental retardation* and self-reports of *amount of interaction* indicate that school experiences do have some influence; however, the influence may well be that of establishing a form of political correctness "all people are the same" that is defeated by greater amounts of interaction. This study provides information that should caution those who promote integration in the schools that simply including children with mental retardation does not necessarily change attitudes. Differences between children need to be explained and children need assistance in interpreting the differences they witness. For those Ss who did not have classmates with mental retardation, the role of *amount of interaction* seems logical and plausible, and indicates a need to not only include children with disabilities physically in the public schools but to foster interactions among disabled and non-disabled children and youth.

Hypothesis B. Students opting to take a course in mental retardation demonstrated more accepting attitudes toward Empowerment than did students taking a course in consumer economics at the beginning of the semester. Even so, their attitudes toward Empowerment still increased significantly after completing the course and having direct contact with people with mental retardation. Attitudes toward Sheltering also changed significantly, with students favoring less sheltering. This is a logical match with an increase in Empowerment and is somewhat surprising given that most of the service experiences were with people who required limited, extensive and pervasive supports. Changes in attitudes toward Exclusivity also increased over the course of the semester.

This was not an expected effect and may be interpreted in Langer's model as a response to initial mindfulness. Students were exposed to people with moderate to profound levels of retardation and this may have changed their general responses on structured scales. Also, responses may have been influenced by "political correctness" on the initial testing and Ss were more honest on the second testing. Their written comments did not support the results reported for the Exclusivity subscale, and this may indicate a bias in the instrument itself. Further work needs to be done to address this question of creating and defeating stereotypical thinking and measuring such change. The influence of providing service via direct contact is confounded in this study with taking a course in mental retardation. Teasing out the effects of contact can be done via students' open-ended responses to questions regarding their experiences with mental retardation during the semester. Students talked about the importance of having direct experiences, how their attitudes had become more positive because of those experiences, and how they had been surprised by the abilities of the people with whom they worked. Follow-up studies are needed that separate these two variables.

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Table 1. Open-ended questions and compiled response data for first year and second year.

1. What surprised you about your volunteer experience?

How limited were the people I worked with	15 %	29%
The people are really individuals	24%	n.s.
I enjoyed the experience	23%	20%

2. Do you think there are benefits to college students participating in a service-learning volunteer experience? If yes, please describe these benefits.

Yes	100%	98%
Benefits:		
I learned more.	64%	63%
I learned not to fear people with mr	14%	18%
Helps with career choices	14%	18%
I learned about myself	9%	n.s.
I gained job experience	35%	18%
A sense of satisfaction	14%	10%

3. What was the hardest part of your volunteer experience?

Overcoming my initial fears	21%	27%
Knowing what to do	21%	2%
Communication	3%	23%

4. What was the easiest part of your volunteer experience?

Interacting with people with mr	72%	76%

5. What have you learned about people with mr?

They are people, too.	83%	60%
They are capable.	26%	15%
They are loving and caring.	n.s	15%

6. Do you think people with mr have any value to society? Support your opinion with specific details when possible.

YES	78%	87%
NO	13%	5%
MAYBE	11%	7%
OMIT	5%	16%

Table 2. Paired sample comparison for CLAS.

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	empowerment	4.0574	42	.6627	.1023
	POSTEMP	4.5308	42	.5804	8.956E-02
Pair 2	exclusivity	1.4544	42	.4498	6.940E-02
	POSTEXCL	1.6769	42	.4806	7.417E-02
Pair 3	sheltering	3.2483	42	.5741	8.858E-02
	POSTSHEL	2.9484	42	.4848	7.481E-02
Pair 4	similarity	5.0060	42	.3876	5.980E-02
	POSTSIM	4.9186	42	.4577	7.063E-02

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pair 1	empowerment - POSTEMP	-.4734	.6028	9.301E-02	-5.090	41	.000
Pair 2	exclusivity - POSTEXCL	-.2225	.5354	8.262E-02	-2.693	41	.010
Pair 3	sheltering - POSTSHEL	.2999	.5899	9.102E-02	3.295	41	.002
Pair 4	similarity - POSTSIM	8.732E-02	.4155	6.411E-02	1.362	41	.181

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Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: similarity

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1.988[a]	3	.663	2.032	.119
Intercept	1435.753	1	1435.753	4403.099	.000
CLSMT	.762	1	.762	2.338	.131
AMTACT	.148	1	.148	.454	.503
CLSMT * AMTACT	1.214	1	1.214	3.723	.058
Error	20.217	62	.326		
Total	1651.437	66			
Corrected Total	22.205	65			

a. R Squared = .090 (Adjusted R Squared = .045)

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: similarity

CLSMT	AMTACT	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1.00	1.00	5.3333	1.0570	10
	2.00	4.9394	.4715	11
	Total	5.1270	.8091	21
2.00	1.00	4.8100	.4058	25
	2.00	5.0000	.4580	20
	Total	4.8944	.4353	45
Total	1.00	4.9595	.6852	35
	2.00	4.9785	.4559	31
	Total	4.9684	.5845	66